



ACHIM SZEPANSKI 2023-12-20

## APOCALYPSE AND CATASTROPHE

NECROPOLITICS APOKALYPSE, BAUDRILLARD, ENDE, FILM, KATASTROPHE

For Baudrillard, implosion is always also a consequence of the disappearance of the causes and effects of power. With the principle of causality, the cause produces the effect. Causes therefore always have a meaning and an end and never lead to catastrophe (they only know crisis). The mode of simultaneity, in which systems circulate in their coexistence, whereby for each system another system represents its environment, now dominates succession (if...then), so that causality loses its significance. The catastrophe draws its energy from the abolition of causes by flooding them under the influence of the effect and hurling the causal connection into the abyss, thus giving things back their pure appearance or disappearance. The causes have now disappeared, but the effects have become immense – for example, when a local catastrophe causes a global standstill. It is never the causes, but the effects and phenomena

that, when they combine, lead to catastrophe. Unlike the crisis, which is merely a disorder of causes, the catastrophe is the delirium of effects and phenomena. There is no coincidence at work in all this. For Baudrillard, it is rather a formal connection of the utmost necessity. A precise distinction must be made between catastrophe, apocalypse and the end of the world. Apocalypse and extinction are not only different, but incompatible and contradictory concepts. In short, while apocalypse ensures the meaning of an end, extinction anticipates the end of meaning. There will be movie footage of the end of the world, and we are seeing it now, and its most salient feature is its apparent inability to reach a conclusion. Maybe someday there will be the footage and no one left to watch it. The apocalypse documents in advance the boredom of the digitized termite man in the face of the spectacle of this never-ending end. An apocalypse that wasn't phantasmagorical or imaginary like the square root of minus one and didn't obliterate us with our own special effects could never deserve the name. At some point the cameras will stop working, and we won't notice when the flood of our footage emerges as ever new. Gary Y. Shipley sees the definitive blockbuster in his book *Stratagem of the Corpse* in eight billion people jogging on treadmills into the void (into the void shown on screens, but too close to our eyes for us ever to see them as screens): The sheep have replaced the beasts of the apocalypse. The climax of the collapse will film itself, documenting its own duration even before it occurs, filming the victory of the end, the extinction of the world's population as a testing ground for the possibilities of pure cinematic excess. (Shipley 2021: 34)

It is not the (active) observation of a spectator, but the passivity of a receiver who absorbs even the virtuality of the corpses on the screen without censorship, question or hope. For Baudrillard, even the apocalypse no longer exists; it has given way to the precession of the neutral, the forms of the neutral and indifference. The apocalypse is the revelation of reality in a world in which only its simulated form still exists. And so, now that the actual apocalypse is behind us, we are instead confronted with the virtual reality of the apocalypse, with the posthumous comedy of the apocalypse. With a silent yawn of our contented uselessness, we enjoy the war that never happened for us in the West. There are no longer any ideologies of war, it is all about the ideology of war. The notion of war as an event with something at stake is behind us, so there is only the media event, making war an empty screen unto itself. We have seen war (and the end) so often that we have grown weary of it. It comes, it goes: nothing changes. But of course it never goes away, which not coincidentally also contributes to our fatigue. Our imagination, at least, is not up to the nuclear war of the end, it is not up to what could be exposed to make this end possible. And it is our failure that gives us the best evidence of the veracity of the end and that it has already happened. Beyond the end, there is only the masturbatory fantasy of an end, only the promise that something will one day disappear and not come back, the hope that when a clock ticks, it is ticking towards something and not just away from something else, something we will never escape. In this way, for Baudrillard, the apocalypse has already become the perfect crime. And whether by deficit or excess, reality will inevitably continue the work of the apocalypse – by obliterating it. The real apocalyptic event then becomes the apocalypse of the apocalypse. (Ibid.)

The catastrophe, on the other hand, is tantamount to an ongoing and worsening polycrisis, in which collapses occur in all areas and a return to normality is postponed into the distant future. Things are accelerated and at the same time halted before they end, in order to keep

them in the tension of their appearance for an indefinite period of time. Catastrophe jealously guards the illusion of eternity, but it also plays with it by fixing things for a second eternity. Catastrophe never completes itself, but more than that, because by never completing itself, it becomes the real, reality as a simulation of itself.

The word catastrophe in Greek originally means *kata* (down) and *streiphein* (turn) to indicate a downward turn, a shift in temporal gravity, like a black hole that reshapes time. A distinction can now be made between disaster, catastrophe and emergency. Disaster is a crisis that suspends normal order for a certain period of time. Normality should and can be restored. In disasters, however, political functions, the economy and the material and social factory are disrupted or interrupted to such an extent that a return to normality is a long way off. The catastrophe is a hole between before and after that cannot be absorbed by the old rationality, while a new normality is still to come. One could also call the catastrophe a black box in which the rationality of the modelable, the knowable and the predictable collapses. (Armand 2023: Kindle edition 128) The catastrophe is multicausal and protracted. It gives rise to what could be called the “homo catastrophicus”. However, talk of catastrophe must not lead critical discourse to fall in love with the idea of its own future in order to end up turning to conservation, that of the planet, humanity and the culture of consumption (while speculative capital coldly and rationally calculates the future). This would only make the spectacle of the end productive for the media. It is not just about Covid, financial crises and climate change today, but above all, as many forms of protest also show, about symbolic forms that formulate nothing more than that any social contract has been broken, while continuing to appeal to it. The end would then perpetuate itself and continue to process the abyss. The myth of the No Future would continue to be reflected in the myths of the coming extinction, which in turn would renew themselves again and again. The ongoing staging of disintegration and the reconstitution of the staging itself – under the banner of the myth of the impossibility of the end (of capitalism) – is precisely what Baudrillard understands as simulation. Even the promise of liberation remains useful or is simulated, insofar as it merely tests the resilience of the system. Baudrillard therefore also says that we live after the orgy (which has liberated everything). We must not equate talk of the end (of the world) with catastrophe. During the coronavirus crisis, governments and central banks deployed exorbitant sums of money to rule out any possibility that the system could come to an end, while at the same time the crisis at least dented the previous confidence in the system as a perpetual motion machine. At the same time, catastrophe bonds are being issued as if the financial markets could be adjusted; various symptoms of the catastrophe, such as the climate crisis, call into question the system's ability to function in order to proliferate and accelerate it at the same time. An entropo-epistemology must concede that the concept of catastrophe does not mean affirming the end of the functionality of capitalism in the present, and above all not linking this specific end to the ability to predict the end of the planet or of evolution. We must think of it differently: like an event or a situation on a planetary scale, the time of catastrophe contains a temporal suspension. Concepts break apart, economic, geopolitical and affective conditions that were considered normal for decades and ensured planetary stability break away. Unforeseeability or contingency arises. Events break loose in all directions. The deterritorialization of capital flows around the globe is now being followed by a re-territorialization of capitalist globalization, which is linked to a deterritorialization of nature. The

distinction between human and natural history is beginning to collapse. The catastrophe can drag on in its banality; it perpetuates itself again and again, even as a farce or on the edge of excess or as a satire on the abyss.

Achille Mbembe comes to similar conclusions in his new book *Brutalism*. For him, brutality is the name for the apotheosis of a form of power without an outside, which denies both the myth of the exit and the myth of another world to come. The distinction between the living and the machines seems to be abolished, accelerating the transition to a new technical system that is network-like, automated, concrete and abstract at the same time. (Mbembe 2024) It must therefore be explained to the god-like delirious agents of technological evolution in the Anthropocene that the world to come will not be based on human agency, but can at best refer to a subjectile (Deleuze) that remains connected to the space-time algorithms of stochastic feedback. This does not mean thinking of the Anthropocene as an autonomous super-agent that determines the entire world and the planet, including the alternatives, which would bring it closer to an absolute singularity, the singularity of history, which is also universal because it is always that of the end of history. The future no longer exists here – on the one hand it has already taken place, on the other hand it must always be postponed.

taken from the forthcoming book: *Delirium of Simulation. Baudrillard Revisited* – by Achim Szepanski

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